

## Translating Symbolism: Cultural Filtering in *The Last Lover*

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### Abstract

Symbolism is a cornerstone for exploring philosophical and existential themes in avant-garde fiction. This study examines how the symbolic elements in Can Xue's novel *The Last Lover* are translated and assesses how these translated symbols change the novel's themes for English-speaking readers. Known for its surreal and fragmented narrative style, *The Last Lover* employs symbolism to convey existentialist themes, cultural ideologies and philosophical explorations. Focusing on key symbols such as houses, animals and dreams, this study explores the significance of these symbols in the original and translated texts during the translation process, analysing how language choice, cultural interpretation and translator strategies affect the symbolic depth and resonance of the text. The study found that while some universal symbols ostensibly retained thematic coherence in the translated text, the deeper layers of symbolism inherent in the original language were lost during translation. This loss of symbolism undoubtedly affects readers' interpretations of the avant-garde text's deeper themes. This highlights the challenges faced by translators in translating culture-specific or abstract symbols in avant-garde fictions. This analysis contributes to a better understanding of the complexities of translating symbolism, emphasising the delicate balance between cultural fidelity and cultural diversity.

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Avant-Garde Literature, *The Last Lover*, Can Xue, Cross-Cultural

### 1. Introduction

Translation is far more than a linguistic process; it is an act of cultural negotiation, especially when dealing with texts rich in symbolism and cultural nuance. Can Xue's *The Last Lover*, a surreal and avant-garde novel, exemplifies the complexities inherent in translating culturally specific symbols. This novel is not only a work of fiction but also a deeply layered exploration of identity, alienation, and existential questions; all rendered through symbols and motifs deeply embedded in Chinese cultural traditions. Translating such a work requires navigating the intricate interplay between universal and culture-specific meanings, a challenge that is compounded by the abstract and fragmented nature of Can Xue's narrative style. This paper examines the process of translating symbolism in *The Last Lover* through the lens of cultural filtering, with a focus on the theory of cultural schemas as a framework for understanding the challenges faced by translators.

Translation often involves more than converting text from one language to another; it is a bridge between cultural contexts. Symbolism, a literary device where symbols are imbued with deeper meanings, can present significant challenges in translation. Translators must grasp both the literal and symbolic meanings of the text to preserve its essence. Misinterpretation or cultural incongruities may lead to a loss of symbolic depth, altering the reader's experience. In Chinese literature, the moon often symbolizes longing or unfulfilled desires. Translating a poem like Li Bai's *Quiet Night Thought* involves maintaining the simplicity and emotional resonance of the original. Lines such as “床前明月光” (chuáng qián

míng yuè guāng) literally translate to “Bright moonlight before my bed.” However, without careful rendering, the symbolic undertones of nostalgia and solitude might be lost. A skillful translation, such as “The bright moonlight before my bed, / Seems frost upon the ground,” retains both the literal and symbolic meanings, evoking the melancholic tone intended by the poet. Especially symbols in avant-garde literature pose challenges for translators.

Avant-garde literature is distinguished by its experimental approaches to form, language, and meaning, often employing symbolism to disrupt traditional narrative structures and provoke new ways of thinking. Symbols in avant-garde texts are rarely straightforward; they are layered, abstract, and often deliberately ambiguous. These symbols serve as a conduit for exploring complex themes such as alienation, identity, and the interplay between reality and imagination. Translating symbols in avant-garde literature always result in the problems of cultural filtering. Cultural filtering in translation refers to the process by which elements of a source text are adapted, omitted, or reshaped to align with the cultural and cognitive frameworks of the target audience. While some symbols in *The Last Lover*—such as natural imagery or the motif of dreams—retain a degree of universality, their deeper layers of meaning are often shaped by cultural schemas that may not exist in the target culture.

This article examines the cultural filtering in the translation of symbols in avant-garde literature, focusing on the potential loss of symbolic meanings in Can Xue’s *The Last Lover*. The theoretical foundation for this analysis lies in cultural schemas, which provide a lens to examine how shared cultural knowledge shapes the creation and interpretation of meaning. By analyzing how cultural schemas influence the symbolic and thematic dimensions of *The Last Lover*, this paper highlights the pivotal role of the translator as a cultural mediator. The study underscores that while translation inevitably involves some loss of meaning, a nuanced approach to cultural filtering can minimize this loss, ensuring that the text retains its symbolic richness and avant-garde spirit across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

### 1.1. Translation and Symbolism

Translation serves as a bridge between cultures, languages, and literary traditions, enabling readers to access works that might otherwise remain obscured by linguistic barriers. Symbolism, as a critical element in literature, often presents unique challenges to translators due to its nuanced and culturally embedded nature. Symbols operate as multilayered constructs, often drawing on specific cultural, historical, or philosophical contexts to evoke meaning beyond the literal. Translators, therefore, face the dual task of decoding the original symbolic intent and re-encoding it within the target language and culture. For instance, a symbol deeply rooted in one culture might be obscure or carry different connotations in another. Translators must therefore engage with the cultural and historical underpinnings of symbols to render them accessible and meaningful for the target audience. As Barthes (1977) notes, “The indeterminate nature of symbols invites interpretive engagement, creating a space where meaning is negotiated rather than imposed” (p. 42).

“Symbols are vehicles for the expression of ideas too complex or abstract to be conveyed in direct language” (Newmark, 1988, p. 95). The process of translating symbolism requires a profound understanding of the source text’s cultural and linguistic dimensions. A translator must navigate between fidelity to the original work and adaptability to the target audience, ensuring that the symbolic resonance is neither lost nor distorted. This dynamic often necessitates the use of cultural filtering, a strategy where the translator modifies or reinterprets symbols to align with the cultural framework of the target language. Such interventions can illuminate universal themes or introduce new layers of interpretation, but they also risk altering the author’s intended meaning. The act of translating symbolism is an intricate balancing act. It involves preserving the author’s artistic vision while making the work resonate in a new linguistic and cultural context. By embracing this complexity, translators play a crucial role in ensuring that literature transcends boundaries, enabling readers to connect with its symbolic depth across time and space.

## **1.2. Symbols in Avant-garde Literature**

Symbols play a pivotal role in avant-garde literature, reflecting its defiance of traditional forms and conventions. Unlike classical literary symbols that are often universal and culturally resonant, avant-garde symbols are frequently abstract, fragmented, and personal. They challenge conventional interpretation, compelling readers to engage deeply with the text to uncover layers of meaning. This approach aligns with the avant-garde’s broader objective of disrupting established norms and reimagining artistic expression.

Prominent avant-garde movements such as Surrealism, Dadaism, and Futurism employ symbols to evoke emotion, critique society, and explore the subconscious. Surrealist writers, for instance, often draw on dream imagery and Freudian psychoanalysis, utilizing symbols that defy logic to explore hidden truths (Breton, 1924). Dadaists, on the other hand, use symbols to mock established societal values and challenge the rationality of art (Tzara, 1918). These movements illustrate how symbols in avant-garde literature are not merely decorative but act as instruments of rebellion and innovation. The interpretive ambiguity of avant-garde symbols aligns with the genre's experimental ethos. By rejecting traditional frameworks, avant-garde literature invites readers to participate in constructing meaning, thereby fostering a dynamic interplay between text and audience (Childs, 2000). The experimental nature of avant-garde literature lies in not only in symbols but also in language. In Poggioli’s view, literary avant-garde’s concentration on linguistic creativity is a “necessary reaction to the flat, opaque, and prosaic nature of our public speech” (Poggioli, 1968). More importantly, the avant-garde consciousness of language can be “cathartic and therapeutic in respect to the degeneration afflicting common language through conventional habits. (Poggioli, 1968).

So, translating avant-garde literature rich in symbolism often results in the partial loss of meaning, as symbols deeply rooted in the source language’s cultural, historical, and contextual dimensions rarely transfer seamlessly. While some universal symbols—such as natural elements or archetypal imagery—may retain their thematic coherence in the translated text, the intricate layers of meaning tied to the original language are frequently

diminished. These layers often rely on linguistic nuances, such as wordplay, idiomatic expressions, or phonetic associations, which are unique to the source culture. For example, a symbol in Surrealist literature might invoke cultural myths or historical events that evoke a profound emotional or intellectual response in the source audience but fail to resonate similarly with readers of the target language. This disconnection risks reducing the richness of the avant-garde text to a mere surface-level representation of its themes.

### 1.3. Can Xue and *The Last Lover*

Can Xue is one of the representatives of Chinese avant-garde writers, known for her experimental writing styles and themes. Can Xue has gained international acclaim for her unique narrative techniques and surreal way of storytelling. Can Xue writes novels, short stories, novellas and literary criticism of Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and Dante. Up to now, her works in Chinese include 2 collected works, 12 novels, 25 novelettes, 15 essays and reviews, and 1 translation. Her works have been translated into English, Japanese, Italian, French, German, etc. and won many awards.

She was not known to the general public in China until she was listed as one of the most competitive candidates for the Nobel Prize in literature in 2019. Chen Xiaozhen, an editor of Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, said in a video interview in 2019: “In fact, although Can Xue's work is said to be relatively niche in our country, her work has always received a high degree of attention abroad. She is one of the Chinese writers whose works have been translated to foreign countries the most (其实残雪的作品虽然说在国内比较小众，其实她的作品一直以来在国外受到很高的关注度。她是中国翻译到国外作品最多的中国作家之一).” ([https://www.pearvideo.com/video\\_1610361](https://www.pearvideo.com/video_1610361)) Can Xue's works focus exclusively on a deeper level, using the artist's creations as the subject matter, questioning the nature of art, and achieving the most ideal state of "pure literature". Her works are characterized by abstract themes and unconventional styles. Her works offer thought-provoking and challenging reading.

*The Last Lover* written in 2005 was translated by Annelise Finegan Wasmoen and published by Yale University Press in 2014. It received Best Translated Book Award in 2015. In addition to this, *The Last Lover* was named “Book of the Year” by The Independent. It was also the only book to be long-listed for both the National Translation Award and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. Love is a pervasive theme in the novel; however, *The Last Lover* often delves into how individuals are continually drifting apart through both real and imagined dimensions of space and time. The novel centers around three main couples: Joe and Maria, who have a son named Daniel; Vincent and Lisa; and Reagan and Ida. Each chapter delves into the life of one of these characters, exploring their journeys through both real and imagined worlds. Despite the growing distances between the central couples, their communication becomes more profound. While there is a loose overarching narrative, *The Last Lover* starts in the West and by its conclusion, several characters have traveled to the East, either in their dreams or in reality.

As an avant-garde novel, *The Last Lover* challenges readers to understand its subject matter. The translator, Annelise Finegan Wasmoen, says that “*The Last Lover* is a difficult novel” and “Can Xue’s style of writing tends to resist immediate attempts at sense-making, but to read her fiction carefully, especially in the longer form of a novel, is to realize that there are intricate patterns and motifs woven through the text.”

(<https://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepencent/2015/04/27/why-this-book-should-win-qa-with-annelise-finegan-wasmoen-about-the-last-lover/>). She also says in another interview that: “What kept me translating was the incredible intricacy of the text: the novel yields new insights even after a dozen readings.” (<https://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepencent/2015/04/27/why-this-book-should-win-qa-with-annelise-finegan-wasmoen-about-the-last-lover/>)

This elucidates that the themes of *The Last Lover* resist immediate attempts at sense-making and readers cannot quickly grasp the plot or meaning in a straightforward manner. *The Last Lover* is a literary work that operates on multiple levels, requiring interpretative effort. It needs to be explored in every way, especially the intricate layers of symbolic elements central to the theme. This article analyzes the culture-specific symbols which are closely tied to the following main themes: love and longing, connection and isolation, identity and self-exploration. Love in *The Last Lover* is depicted as an elusive, often unfulfilled yearning that transcends physical attraction or traditional romance. Characters experience love as an existential pursuit, searching for a connection that often feels out of reach. The characters often feel disconnected from one another, even within close relationships. This sense of isolation highlights the human struggle to bridge internal worlds and communicate effectively.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Cultural Schemas**

Cultural schemas are a foundational concept in cultural linguistics, offering insights into how shared knowledge within a cultural group shapes communication, cognition, and interpretation. These culturally constructed mental frameworks guide individuals in processing information, interpreting symbols, and engaging with their environment. They are rooted in collective experiences, traditions, and values and influence perceptions and interactions both within and across cultures (Sharifian, 2017). They encompass shared understandings of social roles, behaviors, metaphors, and narratives, operating unconsciously to facilitate navigation of cultural contexts.

In translation, cultural schemas are critical for maintaining the essence of the original text while ensuring accessibility for a new audience. They govern how meaning is interpreted and reproduced across linguistic and cultural boundaries, highlighting the importance of understanding culturally specific mental frameworks.

The concept of schemas originates in cognitive psychology, where schema theory describes mental structures used to organize and interpret information. Cultural schemas build on this idea by emphasizing their shared nature within cultural groups. Different



cultural groups naturally interpret culturally embedded concepts in distinct ways. For instance, in Can Xue's novel, *The Last Lover*, “天堂” (Tiāntáng) in Chinese and “heaven” in English differ significantly due to their roots in distinct cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions. In Chinese, “天堂” often carries a more poetic and metaphorical sense. It can describe any beautiful, idealized place or state, not necessarily linked to the afterlife. For example, a serene landscape might be called “人间天堂” (a paradise on earth). The focus is less on personal salvation and more on collective harmony or natural beauty. In English, “heaven” is more commonly associated with an afterlife and is often used in religious or spiritual contexts. It may also symbolize ultimate happiness or perfection, but the connection to the divine or God is usually implicit.

So these schemas, deeply rooted in cultural practices and histories, are fundamental to understanding human diversity because they shape how individuals perceive and interact with the world. Language plays a pivotal role in this process, acting as both a transmitter and reinforcer of cultural schemas. (Sharifian2017) Through daily conversations and literary works, language embeds these shared frameworks, allowing them to be passed down across generations and influencing everything from interpersonal communication to the interpretation of complex ideas.

## 2.2. Challenges in Translating Symbols

Translating symbols in avant-garde novels is uniquely challenging, as these symbols are often embedded within cultural schemas—shared cognitive frameworks that shape how individuals interpret the world. Cultural schemas influence the symbolic meanings of objects, events, and concepts, making translation a process fraught with the potential for misinterpretation or loss of meaning (Sharifian, 2011). Avant-garde literature, with its deliberate use of ambiguous, multi-layered symbols, complicates this further by frequently challenging or subverting established cultural schemas.

One key challenge is the translator's need to navigate differing cultural schemas between the source and target audiences. For example, in Can Xue's *The Last Lover*, symbols such as “fog” or “labyrinth” might evoke existential confusion in one cultural context but resonate differently in another due to divergent metaphysical or literary traditions. Translators must understand and bridge these schema differences to ensure that the symbolic essence is neither diluted nor misrepresented (Katan, 2009).

Additionally, cultural schemas are dynamic and context-dependent, often requiring nuanced interpretation. Avant-garde novels frequently destabilize conventional schemas, forcing readers to reconstruct meaning. For instance, the fragmented narrative style or abstract imagery in these texts may contradict familiar schemas, posing interpretative challenges for translators who must balance fidelity to the source text with comprehensibility in the target culture (Cronin, 2006).

Translating symbolism in *The Last Lover* by Can Xue demands a deep understanding of the novel's surreal, layered narrative and its complex use of imagery. Symbolism in the

novel often defies conventional interpretation, blending universal themes like love, alienation, and memory with cultural elements rooted in Chinese traditions and philosophies. A translator's challenge lies in preserving this richness while making the text accessible to readers from a different cultural and linguistic background.

Key symbols in *The Last Lover*, such as light, dreams, and fragmented landscapes, often carry dual meanings—reflecting both personal and collective struggles. In the novel, for example, natural imagery like rivers and mountains reflects Chinese-specific schemas of interconnectedness and balance. Translators must decide how to handle such symbols: whether to preserve their original meanings or adapt them to align with the target culture's schemas. During the translation process, the primary challenge faced by translators lies in preserving the deeper layers of symbolism inherent in the original language, as these layers significantly influence readers' interpretations of the avant-garde text's themes and any loss in translation could diminish the work's depth and complexity.

### 3. Case Analysis

In *The Last Lover*, landscapes are not static or passive. They are dynamic, multifaceted, and deeply intertwined with the characters' psychological, emotional, and philosophical states. The description of landscapes serves multiple roles that go beyond mere physical settings. They are not just physical settings but are rich with symbolic, philosophical, and emotional layers that carry specific cultural resonances. In *The Last Lover*, by using landscapes in this way, the author, Can Xue challenges readers to engage with her text on multiple levels, encouraging interpretations that transcend the literal and delve into the symbolic and metaphysical. The landscapes serve as mirrors, symbols, and metaphors, enriching the novel's exploration of themes such as alienation, identity, and the human condition. For example, mountains and rivers (山水, shān shuǐ) are traditionally associated with harmony, contemplation, and the flow of life. In *The Last Lover*, these natural elements often appear surreal and fragmented, creating a departure from traditional associations while still drawing on their symbolic heritage. The recurring imagery of fog, shadows, or shifting light can symbolize ambiguity, mystery, and the fragility of perception. It conveys abstract themes such as alienation, identity, and the search for meaning in a fragmented world. So we can find that translating landscapes in Can Xue's *The Last Lover* presents unique challenges due to the cultural nuances embedded in her descriptions.

The translator, Annelise Finegan Wasmoen, showed her translation style and the reasons behind them in an interview, "Can Xue refers to her writing as having an inner mechanism, which sounds mysterious, but there is an associative logic that runs through all of her fiction. Since it was important to follow this associative logic that relates certain words or images to each other, I chose a translation style that kept as much consistency as possible, retaining correlations instead of attempting to achieve a natural flow. This was in the service of leaving the reader in English with the same interpretative leeway as the reader of the original, which is a risky sort of thing. This was the first novel I translated, and in other

translations I've gone in the other direction, but this specific text seemed to call for an extreme level of fidelity: translate everything; explain nothing."

(<https://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepersent/2015/04/27/why-this-book-should-win-qa-with-annelise-finegan-wasmoen-about-the-last-lover/>)

We can find that Annelise Finegan Wasmoen employed foreignization in translating the text rather than domestication, which preserves the original tone and structure, exposing the target audience to the source culture. Foreignization and domestication are key strategies in translation studies. Foreignization retains the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of the source text, allowing readers to experience its "otherness." Venuti (1995) defines foreignization as a "resistance to ethnocentric cultural values," emphasizing transparency in reflecting the source culture. In contrast, domestication adapts the text to the target audience's cultural norms, prioritizing readability and familiarity. Venuti (1995) describes domestication as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values." These approaches reflect a translator's ethical and practical choices, balancing fidelity to the source text with accessibility for the target audience.

Foreignizing the symbols in avant-garde literature deeply rooted in Chinese culture undoubtedly influences readers' understanding of the novel's themes. Foreignization translation can result in symbolic associations rooted in Chinese culture that may not be fully translated into English. As Annelise Finegan Wasmoen herself said: "a translation style that kept as much consistency as possible" is "a risky sort of thing". English readers are likely to interpret word for word translation terms through their own cultural frameworks, potentially altering the scene's tone and meaning compared to the original Chinese text. The following examples illustrate the cultural nuances embedded in the text.

### Case 1

**ST:** 乔坐在办公室的窗口，目送里根的身影消失在街的拐角，在心中想象着那个叫作“海角”的最南端的小地方的自然风景。（《最后的情人》）

**TT:** Joe sat at the window of his office watching Reagan's form disappear around a corner and imagined the natural scenery of that small place in the far south called the Cape. (*The Last Lover*)

In the first case, Joe, one of the characters in *The Last Lover*, sits at the table and watches Reagan, Joe's client, disappear. Joe distances himself from the present moment. His imagination of the natural scenery indicates his desire to escape from his reality and his longing for a distant landscape beyond reach, simpler and more meaningful existence. This emotional state is shown through Joe's thoughts about his client, Reagan: "Reagan had to rush back what very day. He was always hurried like this, and Joe had the impression that his life was full of vigorous activity." Reagan's "vigorous activity" is the desired state of real life for Joe, which is only realized through his contemplation.



Culturally, “海角” (hǎijiǎo) carries deep connotations in Chinese, often tied to geographical, emotional, and literary imagery. Geographically, “海角” (cape) refers to a distant coastal or headland area where the land meets the sea. It is often combined with “天涯” (tiān yá, "the ends of the earth") in the phrase “海角天涯”, which symbolizes vast remoteness or emotional separation. The phrase evokes a sense of yearning for what is distant or unattainable. “海角” (hǎijiǎo) in Chinese stands for the edge of the world, evoking imagery of remoteness, isolation, and the farthest reaches of a journey. The term sometimes conveys a sense of exploration or the desire to reach an unattainable or mythical place. The concept of “海角天涯” might evoke similar sentiments of emotional distance.

In English, “cape” carries cultural connotations of exploration, transition, and human endeavor, often tied to maritime history. Historically, capes such as the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn have been markers of exploration and global trade, symbolizing human resilience and ambition during the Age of Discovery (Clark, 2006). These locations were pivotal in connecting distant regions, but they also represented peril, as their treacherous waters tested sailors' endurance.

In literature, capes are used metaphorically to signify boundaries, transitions, or existential challenges. Joseph Conrad's *The Mirror of the Sea* portrays capes as formidable natural elements that demand respect and symbolize the interplay between human ambition and nature's indifference (Taylor, 2013). Similarly, in environmental narratives, capes often highlight the fragility of ecosystems at the edges of human expansion. For instance, Cape Cod is frequently referenced as an emblem of delicate environmental balance and the need for conservation (Steinberg, 2001).

From the analysis, it is demonstrated that in both Western and Chinese contexts, “the Cape” could symbolize geographic remoteness, exoticism, and a connection to the natural world, but its thematic resonance differs depending on cultural frameworks. “The Cape” is a remote, almost mythical place, representing Joe's emotional desire and spiritual transcendence rather than conquest and sensory richness in English. The translation of “海角” (hǎijiǎo) as “the Cape” filters its inherent meaning embedded in Chinese, which in turn affects the reader's understanding of the thematic meaning of the original text.

In the original text, Joe's contemplation of “海角” hǎijiǎo (The Cape) aligns with *The Last Lover's* themes of searching existence, separation and the interconnection between reality and imagination. “海角” hǎijiǎo (The Cape) demonstrates Joe's internal conflicts, navigating the boundaries between the physical and the mental, the known and the unknown.

This translation choice underscores the challenges inherent in adapting culturally specific terms. By filtering “海角” into “the Cape”, the translator ensures accessibility but

reduces the poetic and symbolic layers that contribute to the depth of the source text. This process highlights the trade-off in literary translation: while cultural filtering makes the text more approachable to the target audience, it often diminishes the cultural richness and emotional complexity of the original. As a result, the translation achieves readability but risks losing the intricate cultural nuances that define the literary identity of the source text.

## Case 2

**ST:** 我去过那种地方, 我说的是荒野里的一间茅屋, 站在门口, 就可以看见附近的山上烧起的野火。这种事你得好好考虑到底, 不要因为公司少不了你就放弃考虑。(《最后的情人》)

**TT:** I've been to places like that. I mean a thatched hut in the wilderness, and from its doorway you can see the mountaintops burned by wildfires. (*The Last Lover*)

This is what Vencent, Joe's boss, said to Joe. The symbolic meaning of “茅屋” (“thatched hut”), and “野火” (wildfire) carries profound thematic meanings that contribute to the novel's broader exploration of existential, psychological, and cultural themes. These elements resonate with the surreal, symbolic, and introspective nature of the novel.

There are notable cultural nuances in the translation of “茅屋” and “野火” into “a thatched hut” and “wildfires” respectively. These terms carry cultural and contextual layers in the source text (ST) that may be adjusted or interpreted differently in the target text.

The term “茅屋” (máo wū) holds significant cultural and historical meaning in Chinese literature and everyday life. It frequently brings to mind simplicity, modesty, and nature, recalling classical texts such as Tao Yuanming's “五柳先生传” (The Five Willows Gentleman) and “归园田居” (Returning to the Countryside), which celebrate a simple, rural way of living. Associated with classical Chinese literature and poetry, such as Du Fu's famous poem “茅屋为秋风所破歌” (The Song of My Thatched Hut Wrecked by Autumn Winds), which carries deep cultural and historical resonance. “茅屋” can mean simplicity and strength, usually related to countryside living or stepping back from everyday life. It has a poetic idea of being near nature and living well with it.

“A thatched hut”, in English, conveys a similarly rustic dwelling but may lack the historical and cultural weight of “茅屋” (máo wū) in Chinese culture. English readers may imagine a quaint, pastoral hut, but they might not perceive the same depth of hardship or poetic resonance.

So we can find that the Chinese term, “茅屋” (máo wū), suggests a literary, philosophical richness associated with simplicity and harmony with nature. It symbolizes a retreat or refuge, a place where one can strip away the layers of societal expectations and connect with their inner self. The simplicity of “茅屋” (máo wū) underscores themes of introspection and a return to essential truths. The English term emphasizes physical description without so many layers.

“野火” (yě huǒ) in Chinese, implies natural blows of fire without control, and it often appears in classical poetry. For example, in Bai Juyi’s line, “野火烧不尽，春风吹又生” (The wildfires cannot consume [the grass]; spring winds blow, and it grows again), “野火” (yě huǒ) symbolizes both destruction and renewal. It might have poetic resonances of cyclical natural processes or human plight.”

In English, “wildfires” foregrounds fires as something that is inherently destructive, especially when it comes to their role in the context of forest fires, as is typically represented in environmental or survival narratives. Wildfires have long been associated with chaos or beginnings in Western culture. For some Chinese people, however, they could be seen more practically, as a type of natural event that places a bet with elements of danger and awe, possibly connected with Chinese Daoist beliefs that balance between ruin and growth. It lacks the cyclical or philosophical undertones of “野火” (yě huǒ) in Chinese poetry. So we can find that the English “wildfires” focuses more on the physical phenomenon and less on the symbolic layers present in “野火” (yě huǒ) within the Chinese context.

This analysis underscores the inherent challenges in literary translation, where words are laden with cultural, historical, and emotional significance. Translators must make conscious decisions about how to convey these elements, recognizing that some loss of nuance is almost inevitable. The goal is to strike a balance where the translated text resonates with the target audience without veering too far from the author's original intent.

Understanding and applying cultural schemas enable translators to anticipate how readers might interpret certain terms based on their cultural backgrounds. By thoughtfully considering these schemas, translators can choose words and phrases that evoke similar feelings and ideas, even if they are not exact equivalents. This requires not only linguistic proficiency but also deep cultural insight into both the source and target languages.

The translation of culturally rich terms like “茅屋” and “野火” (yě huǒ) exemplifies the complexities of cross-cultural communication in literature. While cultural filtering facilitates reader comprehension, it also poses the risk of oversimplifying or altering nuanced meanings. Translators play a pivotal role in bridging cultural gaps, and their choices significantly influence how a work is perceived and appreciated by new audiences. Achieving fidelity to the source text while making it accessible requires careful negotiation

of linguistic and cultural differences, highlighting the translator's artistry and responsibility in bringing literature to a global readership.

### Case 3

**ST:** 乔的妻子玛丽亚正在编织机上织挂毯，那是她的爱好，也是她用来补贴家用的技艺，周围的邻居家都挂着她的工艺品。（《最后的情人》）

**TT:** Joe's wife, Maria, was at her loom weaving a tapestry. It was her favorite pastime, and also a means of supplementing the household income. Almost all the homes in the neighborhood had samples of her handiwork hanging in them. (*The Last Lover*)

The cultural nuances in the representation of themes in *The Last Lover* between “毯” (guà tǎn) and “tapestry” reveal deeper layers of meaning tied to identity, labor and artistic expression. In the novel's exploration of love, memory and cross-cultural relationships. “挂毯” (guà tǎn) in the Chinese context evokes images of practicality and domestic industriousness, reflecting Maria's role in supplementing household income through a skill-based craft. It aligns with traditional Chinese values of thrift, resourcefulness, and the intertwining of art and labor. “挂毯”(guà tǎn) often features Chinese traditional or folk motifs, reinforcing connections to heritage, community, and identity. Tapestry in Western culture often connotes luxury, artistry, and historical grandeur. The English term places Maria's work in a more artistic or decorative domain, subtly shifting the focus from her domestic labor to her creativity. In *The Last Lover*, the nuanced difference between labor as necessity (挂毯) and labor as art (tapestry) touches on the tension between survival and self-expression, reflecting the novel's exploration of characters' internal conflicts and their relationships with external world.

“挂毯”(guà tǎn) often features Chinese traditional or folk motifs, reinforcing connections to heritage, community, and identity. The act of weaving “挂毯” (guà tǎn) could metaphorically signify Maria's effort to bind her fragmented existence in a foreign or estranged setting. Tapestry, as a Westernized equivalent, implies a more universal or non-specific cultural artifact. While it resonates with global readers, it risks losing the culturally embedded significance of “挂毯” (guà tǎn), which might symbolize localized identity in the original Chinese text.

*The Last Lover* delves into the blurred boundaries of identity in a globalized world. By choosing “tapestry,” the translation leans into universality, potentially diluting the cultural specificity that defines Maria's world. As argued by Eoyang (2003) in “Cultural Translation: The Other Language,” such translational choices can mediate between cultural

specificity and global accessibility, but they also risk oversimplifying or generalizing cultural artifacts.

In Chinese culture, “挂毯” (guà tǎn) may embody memory and storytelling through its motifs and designs, often inspired by life experiences or traditional narratives. The loom becomes a metaphor for weaving personal and collective histories. Maria’s weaving in *The Last Lover* mirrors the novel’s fragmented, surreal narrative structure, where memory and reality intertwine. The choice of “tapestry” may inadvertently align Maria’s craft with Western storytelling traditions rather than the deeply personal and idiosyncratic themes central to Can Xue’s writing. Lau’s (2019) essay, “Narrative Fractures in Can Xue,” emphasizes the symbolic weight of crafts like weaving in Can Xue’s novels, serving as metaphors for characters’ attempts to reconcile fragmented identities and histories.

“挂毯” (guà tǎn) in the original text reflects Maria’s relationship with her neighbors, as her handiwork connects her to the surrounding community. It emphasizes the relational and spatial aspects of her craft, which extend beyond the domestic sphere. Tapestry in English evokes a more individualistic and artistic sense of creation, possibly detaching Maria’s craft from its community-oriented roots. *The Last Lover* explores themes of disconnection and relationality in a surreal, disorienting world. The cultural nuance of “挂毯” (guà tǎn) reinforces Maria’s tangible connections to her environment, contrasting with the alienation pervasive in other parts of the novel. Chen’s (2015) “Interpreting Space in Can Xue” underscores how spatial metaphors in Can Xue’s work reflect the characters’ relationships with their physical and emotional surroundings, suggesting that “挂毯” (guà tǎn) anchors Maria within her spatial reality.

The translation of “挂毯” (guà tǎn) as “tapestry” highlights broader issues in cross-cultural representation. While it ensures accessibility to English-speaking readers, it shifts the thematic nuances from practicality, relationality, and cultural specificity to artistry and universalism. This translational choice has implications for how the novel’s core themes—labor, memory, identity, and connection—are interpreted by different audiences.

#### 4. The Translator’s Role

The role of the translator in *The Last Lover* is intricately tied to the concept of cultural schemas, a framework that examines how shared cultural knowledge and cognitive structures inform language and meaning. Cultural schemas, as defined by Sharifian (2017), refer to the collective mental structures that shape how members of a culture interpret experiences, symbols, and narratives. Translating a work as symbolically dense and avant-garde as Can Xue’s *The Last Lover* demands more than linguistic proficiency; it requires an understanding of the cultural schemas embedded in the text and a strategic approach to rendering those schemas accessible in the target language. The study found that while universal symbols, such as light and darkness, ostensibly retained thematic coherence in translation, deeper layers of culturally specific symbolism were often lost, significantly impacting readers’ interpretations of the text’s avant-garde themes. This highlights the



translator's dual challenge of preserving the symbolic integrity of the source text while adapting it to align with the target audience's cultural schemas.

Can Xue's use of symbols is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural schemas, which are informed by philosophical traditions. These symbols carry profound cultural meanings in Chinese thought, where they often represent the interconnectedness of life, nature, and the cosmos. Translating these symbols requires the translator to navigate between retaining their cultural specificity and adapting them to the cognitive frameworks of the target audience. Failure to adequately convey these cultural schemas risks diminishing the symbolic depth of the text and, consequently, the reader's engagement with its deeper themes.

The translator's role is further complicated by the interplay between culturally specific and universal schemas. While some symbols in *The Last Lover*—such as “cape”—might seem universally resonant, their function and interpretation are often shaped by the source culture's schemas. A translator must grapple with the challenge of rendering the culturally nuanced symbolism intelligible to a target audience whose cultural schemas surrounding capes may differ significantly. As Sharifian (2017) points out, the translator's task involves not just linguistic transfer but also the interpretation and adaptation of cultural schemas to ensure that the translated text retains its thematic and symbolic coherence.

The loss of deeper symbolic layers during translation, as identified in the study, often arises from the difficulty of conveying culture-specific schemas in a way that resonates with the target audience. Translators must navigate the interpretive divergences, deciding whether to retain the source culture's schemas, adapt them to the target culture's conceptual frameworks, or provide additional context to guide the reader's interpretation.

The translator's role extends beyond linguistic and cultural mediation to shaping the reader's experience of the text. By interpreting and adapting the cultural schemas embedded in *The Last Lover*, the translator influences how readers engage with the text's symbols and themes. This role is particularly critical in avant-garde fiction, where abstract symbols and unconventional narrative structures challenge readers to actively interpret and construct meaning. As the study highlights, the loss of culturally specific symbolism in translation can significantly impact the depth and richness of readers' interpretations, underscoring the importance of the translator's sensitivity to cultural schemas.

The translator's role in *The Last Lover*, viewed through the lens of cultural schemas, is one of creative interpretation and cultural mediation. By engaging with the cultural schemas that inform the text's symbolism, translators can preserve its thematic and symbolic depth while ensuring its accessibility to a new audience. While some loss of culturally specific meaning is inevitable, the translator's efforts to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps ensure that Can Xue's avant-garde narrative continues to resonate across cultural boundaries. This process not only preserves the artistic integrity of the text but also fosters a richer dialogue between cultures, highlighting the transformative potential of translation as an act of cultural exchange.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that while the universal symbols, “海角” (cape), ‘茅屋’ (“thatched hut”), “野火” (“wildfire”) and “挂毯” (“tapestry”) in Can Xue’s *The Last Lover* often retain thematic coherence in translation, the nuanced layers of culturally specific symbolism embedded in the original language are frequently lost. This phenomenon has significant implications for the reader’s interpretation of the text’s avant-garde themes and highlights the challenges translators face when attempting to render culture-specific or abstract symbols intelligible in a different linguistic and cultural context.

To preserve the avant-garde characteristics of *The Last Lover*, translator Annelise Finegan Wasmoen chose to translate everything without offering explicit explanations, prioritizing foreignization over domestication. This approach allows readers greater interpretive freedom, providing space to explore the novel’s symbolic and thematic significance. However, symbols laden with culture-specific schemas demand careful consideration, as strict fidelity to the source text may result in a loss of deeper meaning for readers unfamiliar with the cultural context. This study highlights the challenges inherent in conveying such schemas across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The translator’s role is an act of cultural mediation that requires sensitivity to the source text’s cultural schemas and creativity in adapting them for the target audience. It also illustrates the crucial role translators play in navigating these challenges and the importance of what translation strategies translators employ to ensure that the symbolic depth of avant-garde literature is preserved as much as possible in the target language. By interpreting and preserving the cultural schemas embedded in the text, translators can foster a richer dialogue between cultures, allowing readers to engage with the universal and particular aspects of the novel. Ultimately, successful translation necessitates a delicate balance—acknowledging cultural differences while preserving the universal themes and symbolic intricacies that define the literary artistry of works like *The Last Lover*.

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**Notes:** Tao Yuanming (陶渊明; also Tao Qian陶潜), one of the greatest poets and essayists in Chinese history. His compositions are full of philosophy and culture, among which his famous works "五柳先生传" (The Five Willows Gentleman) and "归园田居" (Returning to the Countryside), especially reveals the poet's craving for natural rural life.